

**SINGAPOREANS AND THEIR PAST:  
THE DYNAMICS OF HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS  
AND HISTORYMAKING**

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## **CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY**

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.



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## ABSTRACT

National surveys conducted in America, Australia and Canada since the mid 1990s suggest that 'a sense of history' is an essential part of everyday life. The surveys found that contrary to popular perceptions of historical apathy, people in these countries valued the past and are actively engaged in historical activities as part of their daily lives. These studies substantiate claims that historical consciousness, broadly understood as the relationship between people and their past, is ubiquitous and universal – everyone has some sense of the past. Yet, as this thesis will show, the specific ways people understand the past and the activities they engage in are not universal, but rather culturally and contextually bound; there are different 'senses' of history or types of historical consciousnesses.

This thesis investigates historical consciousness in Singapore and how shifts in the Singaporean 'sense of history' are inextricably linked to its culture and context. I posit that historical consciousness in Singapore is moving away from traditional Asian forms of relating to the past – such as through the maintenance of rituals and celebration of festivals – towards a more critical form of historical consciousness that is less tradition-bound and one in which history can be discussed, critiqued and actively created by ordinary people. Yet Singaporeans continue to retain some links to traditional forms of history-making and reveal an endless capacity for adaptation that characterises Singapore society. In addition, a national or 'Singaporean' sense of historical consciousness has begun to emerge. My analysis suggests that ordinary Singaporeans are becoming more actively engaged in producing or 'making' not only their own history but national history in the public realm despite an environment where the government has traditionally dominated almost all aspects of public history. Through exploring history-making efforts in five specific areas – personal history, family history, history film and television, conservation of historic buildings and sites, and national myth and heroes – this thesis demonstrates that public history is a complex process of contestation and negotiation between different histories and history-makers. Singapore citizens are however better positioned to play a larger role in public history aided by technologies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and gradually liberalised political environment. As history-makers they are

able to expand the public understanding of history by offering alternative or oppositional histories to the dominant ones, and through their practices, they are paving the way for more democratic means of history-making.